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ABSTRACT

Teachers of second language writing classes are faced with the task of choosing writing methods that provide their students the greatest opportunity to gain writing skills, but there is a lack of research in this area. This topical bibliography and commentary reviews existing research on second language writing instruction. It concludes that free writing offers value to second language learners, while a strictly grammatically based writing strategy has been shown to be detrimental. It appears that the most advantageous approach to second language writing instruction is to include some skills from both schools of writing (product and process approaches) and to avoid a one-sided teaching method. (RS)

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Second Language Learners: Writing

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Introduction

Writing is a tool for learning and self-discovery, not just a means to demonstrate learning (Emig, 1977; Meyers, 1983; Raimes, 1986). While writing is a key aspect of literacy, the trend in teaching English as a Second Language tends to ignore writing skill development (Edelsky, 1982; Edlesky & Smith, 1989). This is detrimental to the learner because writing has been proven to be an "essential language reinforcing skill" (Hughey et al., 1983). Only recently have Second Language Learners received the attention of writing researchers (Hillocks, 1986; Raimes, 1984). A study conducted by Harris (1985) shows that only two percent of ESL teaching focused on activities related to writing.

Of the two percent directed at teaching writing development, 72% of that time was dedicated to a method of writing called Product Writing. This includes the teaching of mechanics of writing: syntax, punctuation, and spelling. At the opposite end of the writing spectrum is the Process Writing approach. This technique involves imaginative free writing of short stories and journals that relate well with the student's culture and lifestyle. Process Writing has been extensively studied recently due to the evidence that it leads to a more authentic learning experience for second language learners. There are several different varieties of the two major schools of second language writing, but recent research suggests that some strategies are significantly more beneficial than others to the learner.

Grammar-Focused Writing (Product Writing)

This approach to writing is concerned with the grammar and technical side of writing. Students are heavily instructed on parts of speech, parts of sentences, clauses, sentence structure, spelling lessons, and punctuation. The focus on mechanics is congruent with the teaching of skills based writing, which is also called product writing or structured writing. The purpose of this approach is to "help students understand how the English language works" (Hillocks, 1987). This method can be described as writing as an end rather than a means because it values proper writing technique more heavily than the ideas that are expressed. Although the proponents of this method have good intentions, there is evidence that the study of traditional grammar in this sense "has no effect on raising the quality of student writing" (Hillocks, 1987). In actuality, Hillocks reported a "significant loss in overall quality of student writing" when this strategy is employed exclusively (p. 74).

A related yet distinct method called "sentence combining" involves building complex sentences from more simple ones. This method was found to be more beneficial to the development of writing skills in adult second language learners than free writing alone (Hillocks, 1987, p. 74). Free writing, on the other hand, was found to be an effective teaching method for both second

language learners and native English-speaking children (Kreeft Peyton & Seyoum, 1987). According to Hillocks (p. 81), "the most important knowledge is procedural: general procedures of the composing process and specific strategies for the production of discourse and the transformation of data for use in writing."

Grammar-Focused Teaching Technique

As students attempt to complete their assigned works, they receive what is called micro-level error feedback. What this means is that their teacher is responsible for marking the individual errors in usage of mechanics, sentence structure, and paragraph structure. Scoring can be a summation of errors counted or an overall analytic rating such as a 1–5 rating for different categories of important writing criteria. This analytic rating approach gives students an idea of their general strengths or weaknesses in their main areas of writing. Typically the main areas of analysis are mechanics and usage, idea development, vocabulary, paragraph cohesiveness, and addressing the audience.

The more overall analytic rating method is more beneficial to students because it prevents the confusion of numerous error corrections. With fewer numbers or points of grading, they can more easily track their improvements and weaknesses. Also, the teacher can use the scores to decide the points that each student needs further help with. According to a study by Gomez (1996), more contemporary structured writing entails:

- Pre-assigned topic and purpose of writing
- Grading upon syntactic and lexical accuracy as well as "ideational content"
- Students receive prompt error feedback and corrections on a limited number of targeted skills
- Students may be asked to make corrections in these prioritized skills as research shows exhaustive error correction is ineffective.

Free Writing

Due to the cultural differences of most second language learners, it is often more difficult for them to relate to the concepts in assignments they are expected to complete in grammar-focused classes. Some teachers attempt to avoid this cultural difficulty by allowing their students to choose their own topics. The most common free writing activities utilized in second language classrooms are dialogue journals, stories, folk tales, and literature response (Chanthalangsy & Moskalis, 2002). These avenues of expression permit the student to embrace their cultural background as they strive to learn a new language (Pfingstag, 1984).

Hudelson (1988) reviewed research on writing instruction methods for second language learners and concluded:

- ESL learners, while they are still learning English, can write: they can create their own texts.
- ESL learners can respond to the world or others and can use another learner's responses to their work in order to make substantive revisions in their texts.
- Texts produced by ESL writers look very much like those produced by young native English speakers. These texts demonstrate that the writers are making predictions about how the written language works. As the writer's predictions change, the texts change.
- Children approach writing and develop as writers differently from one another.
- Culture may affect the writer's view of writing, of the functions or purposes of writing, and of themselves as writers.

- The ability to write in the native language facilitates the child's ESL writing in several different ways. [It] provides learners with information about the purposes of writing...second language learners apply the knowledge about writing gained in first language settings to second language settings.

Whole Language Teaching Techniques

A study performed by Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982) found that "relaxed and self-confident learners learn faster...they learn most from their peers and from people with whom they identify." It is the goal of the whole language approach to put second language students at ease and allow them greater freedom in their writing. The functionality of this method is key to its success in developing writing skills. By allowing students to pick their own subject matter, they are able to write about topics involving their life and culture. Some free-writing mediums employed by Whole Language teachers that allow second language learners to express their thoughts more freely are daily journals, folk stories, diaries, fiction stories and literature response.

Since students differ in the settings in which they write best, the classroom should provide both quiet places and places where students are allowed to converse about their writings. This will allow for the transmission of ideas when students are in need of social criticism and at the same time permit a quiet writing atmosphere. Because mechanics are still vital to effective writing, teachers should provide some grammatical help to students. Editing and revision centers should be incorporated into the learning environment. Reference guides such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and grammar books are helpful in the editing and revision process. They should be discussed and arranged in an easily accessible location.

Illustration of the completed texts can be enjoyable for the younger learners. Crayons, markers, and other visually stimulating aides can add to the creativity and individual expressions of the students' work. Illustrations can also help the students better portray the ideas they couldn't completely express through writing.

Conclusion

Teachers of second language writing classes are faced with the task of choosing writing methods that provide their students the greatest opportunity to gain writing skills, but there is a lack of research in this area. Research has shown that free writing offers value to second language learners. A strictly grammatically based writing strategy has been shown to be detrimental. It appears that the most advantageous approach to Second Language Writing instruction is to include some skills from both schools of writing and to avoid a one-sided teaching method (Hagemann, 2003).

Internet Resources

*Writing and English as a Second Language
Strategies for helping English Language Learners throughout the writing process are included in this article from LEARN NC - The North Carolina Teachers' Network, a program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education
http://www.learnnc.org/Index.nsf/doc/write-es10603?OpenDocument

*English as a Second Language Writing Lesson Plans Collection
A collection of lesson plan links from About.com
http://esl.about.com/library/lessons/blwritingplans.htm

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